

GOODING CHARTER SCHOOL FLAP PROMPTS LEGISLATION

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BOISE - Idaho lawmakers are quietly working on legislation they hope will prevent the spread of the kind of friction seen recently between proponents of charter schools and traditional schools in Gooding.

A group of Magic Valley lawmakers and a lobbyist for charter school supporters on Monday held an informal private meeting to discuss the uproar in Gooding caused by the transfer of 10 percent of Gooding School District students to North Valley Academy, which opened in August last year.

"They were concerned about other charter schools' reputations," said Rep. Jim Patrick, R-Twin Falls, who attended the meeting. "They don't want it to go into other communities. They just don't want the issue to be a black eye."

Gooding school officials have expressed concern that the charter school could take in so many students that it would leave the traditional public schools short of money as state funding is shifted along with the students.

The issue has split the small community, and Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Luna recently held a question-and-answer session aimed at easing divisions there.

Ken Burgess, who represents the Coalition of Charter School Families, described the Monday meeting as a chance to explain the Gooding situation to lawmakers from other parts of the valley. While he and others said legislation is in the works, he said he would rather see the issue play out a little more before drastic changes are made.

"It's essentially ripping the scabs off some of the wounds we thought had healed," Burgess said.

Rep. Wendy Jaquet, D-Ketchum, said she is drafting legislation aimed at improving communication between charters and traditional schools and at avoiding conflict in other areas. The city of Gooding, with a population of less than 4,000, is the only rural Idaho town with a charter school, though many more charter applications are pending.

NVA has about 160 students in grades K-8, and more than 100 of them have come from within the school district. Next fall it will also offer high school classes.

Jaquet said she primarily wants to expand notification requirements for charter schools, which are now required only to describe their plans in their initial petition for a charter. When North Valley wanted to expand to include high school students, it simply posted the idea on a Web site.

Burgess said he doesn't believe legislation dealing with those ideas will draw much opposition.

Jaquet also wants less "duplication" of programs offered by charters and other schools in the same district. For example, schools should share dual enrollment classes, she said.

Jaquet said she wants the legislation, which is still being written, to require more consideration of a charter school's impact on traditional schools.

Rep. Donna Pence, D-Gooding, said she will likely support the legislation, though Burgess said he'd need to see it before commenting.

Tamara Baysinger, program manager for the Idaho Charter Schools Commission, said the issue is likely to surface at the commission's April board meeting.

Meanwhile, Burgess said he still plans to try and lift the state's limit of no more than six new charter schools each year. Idaho's first charter school opened in 1998, and now there are 31 statewide.

Baysinger said the commission would consider lifting the cap, but would have concerns about potential drawbacks.

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In Idaho, charters, conventional schools compete

A few minutes after the bell pulses into his classroom, Gus Spiropulos waits for the fifth graders to finish their noisy parade to the door and then reluctantly begins his calls to parents.

His approach is polite and he keeps it short; there are only a few troublemakers. But he's also careful because parents in this tiny dairy community no longer have to send their children to Gooding Elementary School, or even Gooding Middle School. Starting this fall, they'll also be able to opt out of the traditional public high school here.

That choice is as Idaho lawmakers intended when they authorized charter schools a decade ago, part of a wave of states that embraced an alternative to the conventional classroom.

Since then, conventional public schools across the state have lost students to charter schools. Gooding, however, is the poster child for the impact of charter schools on one of the poorest districts in the state.

"I'm not sure they totally understood what they were doing, the ramifications of putting a charter in a rural school district," Spiropulos said. "Now they know."

While charters have become ingrained in the educational fabric of states like Arizona, Michigan, Colorado and Florida, there are still Idaho lawmakers who consider them a threat to the traditional public school system.

Less than a year after North Valley Academy opened in Gooding, the traditional public school system has lost about 100 students - 10 percent of its total enrollment - and a portion of the tax money that supported those students.

On Feb. 10, voters had to pass a supplemental property tax levy to raise about \$325,000 for the Gooding School District to ward off the elimination of music and athletic programs caused partly by the departure of the charter school kids and in part by the economic downturn. The levy passed 669 to 393, but it also worsened a rift that emerged in Gooding when the school buses here started carrying two sets of kids.

The students headed to North Valley Academy wore sharp uniforms, khaki bottoms and polo or button down shirts in red, white and blue. The kids headed to the regular public school were suddenly different.

"It segregated the community," said Holly Church, a 30-year-old teacher who lives in Gooding and works in the public schools in nearby Wendell. "People who had been friends for 40 years are now fighting, they're saying: My kid goes to the public school, well my kid goes to the charter school."

Butch and Mary Stolzman will have grandchildren in both public school systems this fall. They voted for the levy in support of the regular public schools, but parents also seem to like the charter school.

"We haven't quite figured out which one is better," said Butch Stolzman, a 63-year-old who owns a pellet mill in town.

More than 30 charter schools have been established in Idaho by teachers, parents and community members. For just about every one of the 11,000 students enrolled in a charter school, there is another kid on a waiting list.

They are public schools, funded with state money, but given more flexibility in how they operate. They draft charters with specific goals and their students are subject to standardized testing, just like they would be in regular schools.

They hold a smaller percentage of minorities compared to traditional schools statewide and several, like North Valley Academy, have adopted rigorous college-prep programs where students wear uniforms and adhere to strict discipline codes.

Debra Infanger wanted students in this county, where cows outnumber residents 12 to one, to have the same alternative being offered in school districts across the state. She founded North Valley Academy, which has about 162 students in kindergarten through eighth grades and will expand to include grades 9-12 this fall.

"I don't regret it at all," said Infanger, the retired owner of a glass repair business. "I don't like to see rural kids shorted just because we live in the country and don't like a lot of traffic."

All five of her children went to regular schools here, she tutored algebra, frosted cupcakes for bake sales.

"I don't want to hurt the traditional public schools. I just believe in choice," Infanger said. "I think having two schools in town just makes both of us work harder."

About 100 miles west of Gooding, lawmakers in the state capital have set the stage for a legislative battle over a plan to temporarily freeze approval of new charter schools for the next three years, beginning in July.

Sen. Dick Sagness wants to place a moratorium on the establishment of new charter schools until the economic turmoil subsides.

Charters received nearly \$60 million last year in state money, while more than half of the 115 school districts in Idaho have gone to local taxpayers and are operating with supplemental levies, Sagness, D-Pocatello, said.

"If they're in a district where the charter school resides, it's having an impact, opportunities are being reduced," Sagness said. "Tell me how that's fair, or reasonable."

At least one Republican senator vowed to oppose the bill, which is likely to fail and has also drawn criticism from public schools chief Tom Luna.

"I think it would send a signal to the parents of Idaho that we are not going to respect their demands," said Luna, who supports a plan to raise the cap on the number of new charters allowed to open each year.

In neighboring Washington state, the Legislature's approval of charter schools in 2004 was swiftly overturned by voters in a referendum at the next election.

But nationwide, efforts to stymie the growth of charter schools have largely failed and there are now 4,600 of them in 40 states with 4.5 million students, said Jeanne Allen, president and founder of the Center for Education Reform, a school choice advocate based in Washington, D.C.

"Lots of people wanted to shut down the competition, but reason prevailed and traditional school leaders learned how to do better," Allen said. "Those who didn't have either continued to suffer or they have closed."